DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 683 UD 030 494

TITLE	A Framework for Urban Hope: The New American Urban School District.
INSTITUTION	Education Commission of the States,.Denver, Colo.
SPONS AGENCY	Joyce Foundation, Chicago, IL.; Prudential Foundation, Newark, N.J.
PUB DATE	Jan 95
NOTE	27p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Education Commission of the States Distribution Center, 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, CO 80202-3427 ($5, plus postage and handling, $2.50 up to $10; $4.25 for $10.01 to $25; $5.75 for $25.01 to $50; $8.50 for $50.01 to $100; $12 for over $100; 10-24 copies, 10% discount; 25-49 copies, 20% discount; 50 or more, 30% discount).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; Accountability; *Decentralization; *Educational Change; Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; Minority Groups; Models; School Districts; *School Restructuring; Standards; *State Action; *Urban Education; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS	*Reform Efforts

ABSTRACT

The Education Commission of the States presents an urban education policy framework that is guided by the firm conclusion that state and city leaders must develop a collaborative approach to improve the state and urban education system. Toward this end, the following recommendations are made: (1) raise the state's academic standards; (2) free up urban systems to pursue instructional strategies tailored to their students; (3) reallocate funds to allow urban districts to do their special jobs and link funding to fiscal accountability and reforms that clearly improve student achievement; (4) decentralize decision making and accountability to the local school level; (5) create more effective and efficient operating environments through new approaches to labor and management relations; and (6) work collaboratively to change both the state and urban school systems. A new American Urban School District that can inspire hope in young people and pride in the community is the goal of these reforms. (SLD)

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a framework for urban HOPE

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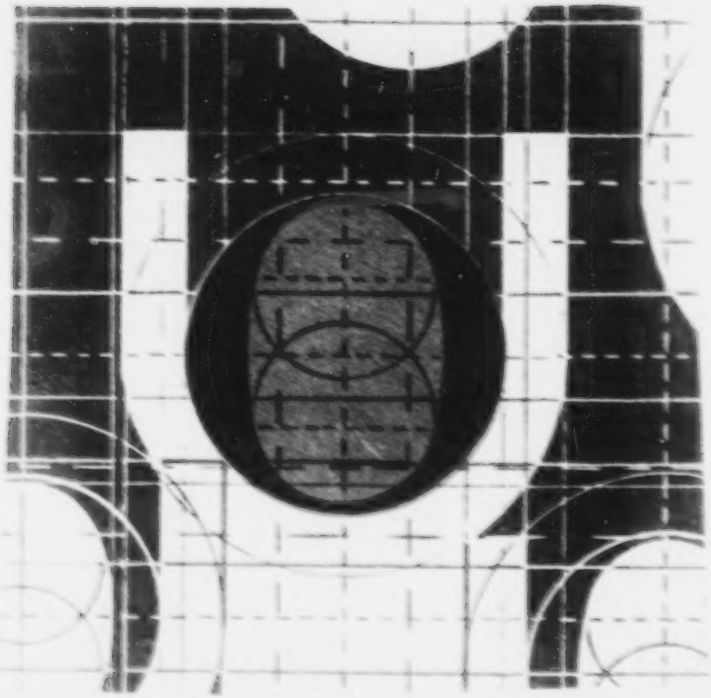

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THE NEW AMERICAN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

If education systems reflect the life-chances students have, the futures of many children in our urban school districts appear bleak. Too many urban students drop out or are graduated with marginal skills and no job prospects. Poverty and crime eat away at family values and neighborhood conditions that can help students succeed in school. Racial and class tensions thwart political progress; city and school bureaucracies slow reform to a crawl and drive

"Cities with strong education systems can develop the human resources necessary for robust growth and participation in a global economy."

imaginative educators out of the system. Policymakers and agency officials devote too much time and energy to fighting over turf rather than sharing and expanding what works.

These problems stymy learning and damage our children and communities, with the effects reaching far beyond city boundaries. The state's financial wealth, and its future, are profoundly affected by the health of its cities, as generators of commerce, and by the health of its people, who can either be contributors to society or costly drains upon it. Every person who is not productive increases the amount cities must pay for extra police officers, prisons and courts. And the violence spreading among our neighborhoods is evidence that many young people feel so disconnected that they have lost their regard for life — their own or anyone else's — a scenario that endangers the very fabric of our democratic society.

No state, and no citizen, can afford to ignore such conditions in our urban areas. Although education policy alone cannot solve the complex problems that plague cities, it can play a major role in shaping and energizing solutions. Cities with strong education systems can develop the human resources necessary for robust growth and participation in a global economy. Cities with weak education systems will move increasingly to the economic margins, taking their states with them.

State officials can no longer dismiss city education problems as "local control" issues beyond the scope of state policy. Nor can they impose abstract solutions or quick fixes cooked up by people outside the city limits. The urgency of the matter and the complexity of the issues require new kinds of collaboration between city and state, coupled with new kinds of policy.

STATE POLICY AND URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS: A FRAMEWORK FOR

Expanding What Works

While the condition of our cities and their schools may at times seem overwhelming, it is not hopeless. Everything has not been tried, and everything that has been tried has not failed. A number of schools in urban areas are succeeding in turning around children's lives in spite of the odds. But the effort has to reach far beyond individual school doors; no major urban area has yet attempted to change the whole urban education system itself, instead of parts of it. No state has yet undertaken a full partnership with an urban district to bring about systemic

changes that would dramatically increase the number and quality of learning opportunities for urban young people. States have not yet done all they can to coordinate and refine how they provide services to young people and what those services are. And urban school districts have not come close to testing the limits of what they can do differently to better serve their students. Turning urban schools around must be the agenda for the rest of the 1990s. What follows is a framework for getting started.

THE ECS URBAN POLICY FRAMEWORK

This urban policy framework is based on a decade of work with state leaders interested in urban education issues, conversations with urban educators and people who support their efforts to improve, research studies, literature searches and feedback from reviewers of each draft of this framework. Most recently, ECS staff worked with urban educators to review four urban districts' policies and interview educators, civic and business groups, political leaders, parents and members of the research community. In addition, ECS studied state and district policy to determine the degrees to which policies at the two levels were consistent with one another in enhancing efforts to implement reforms that markedly improve teaching and learning.

One over-arching conclusion guides this framework: **state and city leaders must develop a collaborative approach to improving the state and urban education *system*, not just parts of it.** Accomplishing this will require an acknowledgment that urban systems face unique problems requiring unique changes in policy, funding, operating environment, working conditions, politics and communication. It will require an acknowledgement that some forms of state policy are "part of the problem" and must be replaced with different or more flexible policy structures that can be "part of the solution." And it will require imagination and boldness. The stakes are too high for piecemeal or tepid action.

"... state and city leaders must develop a collaborative approach to improving the state and urban education system."

Improving the urban education system will require simultaneous action in several areas: *changing relationships between state and districts; providing services to young people and their families in new ways; and creating a new type of urban school district* that is better equipped to provide what its students need in imaginative ways. ECS recommends that state officials, in collaboration with urban district officials, work to:

1 *Raise the State's Academic Standards.*

Low expectations lead to low achievement. High expectations lead to high achievement. Urban systems must have standards at least as high as any other school district's.

- Develop new, higher performance standards that will prepare students for life in the 21st century and engage urban districts in doing the same. The state should set standards for what all students should know and be able to do, and urban districts should supplement them to meet their students' additional needs.
- Create state assessments tied to these new, higher standards and provide urban districts with

assistance in creating similar assessments needed to supplement what the state provides.

- Modify state textbook adoption criteria to ensure that state-recommended materials are based on high-quality standards such as those developed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.
- Forge and support relationships among urban colleges and universities and urban K-12 systems to ensure that all students above the 4th grade know exactly what content and other skills they must master to enter higher education.
- Forge and support relationships between urban systems and business and labor groups to ensure that all students above the 4th grade know what kinds of skills and knowledge the world of work will require so they will be able to make that transition easily.

"Urban systems must be freed from state and federal restrictions on their capacity to restructure teaching and learning."

Free Up Urban Systems To Pursue Instructional Strategies Tailored to Their Students.

Higher standards will not help urban students if everything else about their schooling stays the same. Urban systems have high concentrations of poor and special education students and students whose first language is not English. Such students may require more time to reach standards, different kinds of instruction or non-conventional learning environments. Urban systems must be freed from state and federal restrictions on their capacity to restructure teaching and learning in order to help students meet new, higher standards. And teachers in urban systems must have access to state-of-the-art knowledge about how best to help their students learn.

- Provide districts with incentives to give schools authority and responsibility for finding innovative ways of ensuring that all students will meet new, higher standards of performance. Define consequences for school boards, superintendents, central administrators, teachers, principals and students if, after assistance and sufficient resources are provided, standards still are not met. (See Florida's "Blueprint 2000" and Minnesota's "Learning for Success" program for examples of strong accountability-oriented approaches.)
- Design and fund professional development opportunities that are consistent with new, higher state standards and focused on the special problems of educating urban youth.
- Focus teacher certification and licensure requirements on the special problems of educating urban youth. Involve higher education institutions in developing new and more responsive models of teacher and administrator preparation for the urban environment.
- Support partnerships between urban districts and networks that have strong track records in engaging urban teachers and youth interested in performing to the highest standards (e.g., the Urban Math Collaborative).
- Create an electronic clearinghouse to provide educators with information on state-of-the-art standards, curriculum frameworks and curricular practices.

Reallocate Funding To Allow Urban Districts To Do Their Special Job. Link Funding to Fiscal Accountability And Reforms That Clearly Improve Student Achievement.

An erosion of public confidence in urban systems' ability and willingness to change has resulted in fewer people wanting to "throw money" at a situation that many people think is hopeless. Although many urban youth do require greater commitments of time and energy than more advantaged students, both districts and states must face some funding realities. Urban districts must demonstrate that they can use money wisely before they can hope to receive additional funds, and state policymakers must decide how best to invest *all* available state resources to improve student academic achievement.

- Examine all state revenue sources directed at urban youths and their families, including education, welfare, health, job training and other social service programs. Determine how that total amount can be invested most efficiently in the community to help families create and support living conditions favorable to student learning at home and at school.
- Redesign state education budget reporting requirements to reduce the number of categorical funding streams and elicit better accounting of dollars spent helping students reach the higher standards, rather than on "contact hours" or "seat time."

"Although many urban youth do require greater commitments of time and energy than more advantaged students, both districts and states must face some funding realities."

- Help urban districts determine how their money is spent and what impact funding has on improved learning. (See Arthur Anderson study of Denver Public Schools operations for an example).
- Eliminate financial disincentives for improvement, i.e., programs that take money away from schools that markedly improve learning on the grounds that the students are no longer "at risk." Provide financial rewards for schools and districts that succeed in raising student achievement.
- Target additional dollars for early childhood and at-risk youth programs shown to raise academic achievement.
- Provide incentives for urban districts to decentralize budgeting in ways that focus more resources on teaching and learning.
- Create charter school legislation with special incentives for developers of innovative inner-city schools.
- Link educators' salary schedule to learning that relates directly to new, higher standards and ways of helping urban youth meet them.
- Work jointly with urban districts to explore advantages of privatizing or contracting out various district services.

Decentralize Decisionmaking And Accountability to the Local School Level.

The relationships among adults in organizations charged with the responsibility of working with youth can either support or undermine learning opportunities. Opening up schools to greater community involvement is beginning to influence the quality of school learning environments. Site-based decisionmaking in cities such as Chicago and Denver began as a way of improving governance, but is evolving into a way of improving teaching and learning. Research shows that student learning improves not only when standards are raised but also when teachers have the freedom to make changes in their classrooms to better serve kids and when parents are more involved in their children's education.

Site-based decisionmaking requires considerable delegation of powers long held by central administrations, but must be accompanied by responsible deregulation and debureaucratization. In turn, the people making the decisions — those people closest to the students — are held accountable for students' meeting higher standards.

- Using legislative action (Illinois), executive action (Colorado) or judicial action (Kentucky), find mechanisms to decentralize urban school districts in ways that make them more responsive to their students and more susceptible to change.
- Provide state technical assistance to site-based decisionmaking teams and help them evaluate their progress.
- Assess the extent to which state law establishing and empowering urban school boards can be rewritten to eliminate their most serious weaknesses: over-regulation, centralization, inflexibility and loss of public confidence. Also, assess the degree to which other state policies, rules and regulations contribute to the difficulties urban boards encounter in trying to do their jobs.
- Re-orient policy to encourage good things to happen rather than to prevent bad things from happening. Some regulations designed to prevent bad things from happening keep school officials from being able to make decisions that would better serve their students.
- Redesign relationships between state departments of education and urban school districts, forging a new culture of service and support rather than focusing on monitoring compliance with laws and regulations.
- Provide waivers from various regulations for schools that are improving student performance.
- Require urban districts to sunset policies and streamline processes that hamstring efforts at reform and eliminate paperwork burdens. Also eliminate state laws and regulations that have outlived their original intent or current expectations.
- Work with urban districts and accrediting agencies to design new accreditation processes requiring strong but diverse accountability measures for individual urban schools.

"Research shows that student learning not only improves when standards are raised but also when teachers have the freedom to make changes in their classrooms..."

Create More Effective And Efficient Operating Environments Through New Approaches to Labor and Management Relations.

Neither district administrations nor labor unions seem able to break out of their factory-style adversarial relationships. When these relationships become dysfunctional, public trust is eroded and students suffer. In too many urban districts there is a union/board-management breakdown. The collective bargaining system itself is a system that operates on a contentious, hostile, we/they construct and the state collective bargaining system itself has not accepted responsibility for terminating and redirecting this system. Bureaucratic rules and union work rules alike can smother initiative and paralyze urban districts. Some districts have taken steps to improve such relationships, such as Dade County, Florida, where the district administration and teachers have worked to institute site-based management. Such innovative thinking about the organization of work in urban school districts should be encouraged, and the state must lead the way.

"When relationships (between district administrations and labor unions) become dysfunctional, public trust is eroded and students suffer."

- Develop state-level policy trust agreements, such as those approved by the National Association of State Boards of Education. The intent of these agreements, which are not as rigid as contracts, is to gain statewide agreement on some aspects of negotiations.
- Adopt salary schedules with bargaining provisions that reward and recognize skill differentiation and mastery.
- Design staffing procedures that allow flexibility at the local school level.
- Analyze state policy for exceptions related to labor/management issues (e.g., work hours, pensions, teacher transfer policies, personnel selection and assignment criteria, and tenure) to determine if exceptions benefit students. For example, what effect would extending the school day have on students, as well as adults?
- Redesign labor contracts to retain fundamental rights and due processes, but also to remove rigid, "one-size-fits-all" rules.
- Enforce state and federal laws addressing chronic urban district problems such as patronage, corruption and nepotism. Labor strife and petty political squabbles consume energies that might otherwise be used for improving student learning.

"Bureaucratic rules and union work rules alike can smother initiative and paralyze urban districts."

Work Collaboratively With Cities To Change Both the State and Urban School Systems.

Old-style state politics that pit city interests against suburban and rural interests do not work in the public interest. Policymakers and the public are discovering that everyone in the state is in the same economic boat, riding out the same economic storm. The economic and social health of a state's major cities cannot be ignored or treated as a partisan issue without serious consequences for the state as a whole.

Likewise, systemic change requires that policy makers consider the implications of action in one policy arena — transportation, for example — on other arenas, such as education, health, the environment and human resources. This kind of thinking is particularly important in addressing the problems of urban neighborhoods and the youth who are trying to grow up in them. States can lead the way toward systemic policymaking and do it in ways that influence how cities and their school districts do business.

- Develop economic enterprise zones and comprehensive, systemic change efforts such as the Collaborative Services Project in Austin, Texas or the Atlanta Project in Georgia.
- Design state cross-agency collaboration efforts that maximize education and children's services dollars. Cross-agency efforts bring educators together with health and social service providers, representatives of juvenile justice, and other agencies serving young people and their families to work as a team in meeting students' needs in all these areas, rather than providing services in isolation.
- Change state legislative committee structures so that education policymakers and social service policymakers can make policy together.

"The economic and social health of a state's major cities cannot be ignored or treated as a partisan issue without serious consequences for the state as a whole."

- Reward city, county and district collaboration efforts to improve responsiveness and effectiveness of youth services.
- Develop a statewide youth policy to coordinate services and social policies that affect children and their families. Such a policy would eliminate duplication of services and expenditures, and allow families to receive services from one source rather than having to deal with several agencies or providers.
- Analyze exceptions and waivers granted to state mandates to determine the impact on student achievement.
- Analyze and report on the success of state and national reform networks, such as the Coalition of Essential Schools or Accelerated Schools.
- Design accountability processes that focus on student achievement goals, engage the public, and use and report student data in meaningful and understandable ways (student achievement measures, dropout information, postsecondary education entry and success, school-to-work transition success, employer satisfaction).

THE NEW AMERICAN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

A key aspect of the "general supervision" duty of the state requires the state to become more active in the solution of the urban problem. When an aspect of the state system is struggling — as is the core city — the state is OBLIGATED under the constitution to take action. If we believe all children can learn, but don't all learn in the same way or at the same rate, states have the responsibility to design education systems that provide a continuum of options, a variety of instructional models and approaches for all children — from homeless to homeschooled. How would a state go about exploring other ways of doing business?

The obvious result of a state working to carry out the efforts described above is an urban school district that looks and feels very different from current districts. The most intractable problems of urban education stem from the isolation of urban families and concentrations of disadvantaged students in substandard, crowded and badly managed schools. If the nation's most troubled urban young people are to succeed, it will have to be in the larger world beyond their neighborhoods. This need cannot be met by a school district that is itself isolated from that larger world — geographically and financially — from the rest of the city and its suburbs.

In order to achieve dramatic improvements in urban education, states and urban districts may have to design new metropolitan education entities. In the spirit of the "New American Schools" being called for by national and state leaders, these redesigned districts might be called "New American Urban School Districts." These new districts could be uniform, totally decentralized or comprised of interlaced networks of like-minded schools. They could be both geographic and electronic. Their key feature, however, would be that they mitigate, in imaginative ways, the destructive effects of racial and economic isolation.

"In order to achieve dramatic improvements in urban education, states and urban districts may have to design new metropolitan education entities."

New and different kinds of legal entities may provide choice and diversity in public schooling. Some models may merge school and municipal governance to better serve children. Yet others may make greater use of educational entities other than conventional schools, for instance, YMCAs, community colleges, etc.

In this move to reinvent public education, the proposition is that public school systems should be redefined as systems that serve the public, are publicly accountable, publicly financed but not necessarily owned by a government agency in a bureaucratic, rule-bound fashion, or necessarily staffed by government employees. Possible directions include privatization, charter schools and competing public providers including reform networks.

"New and different kinds of legal entities may provide real choice and diversity in public schooling."

Three main tensions must be resolved within the policy arena before a New American Urban School District would be possible, however. Those tensions are:

1. The trade-off between decentralization and accountability — Decentralization leads to new problems such as how to compare districts and schools that look and run very differently from one another.

2. The tug-of-war between diversity and equality — Equality used to mean offering the same thing to every student in every school; in a new school district, it may mean offering different things to meet diverse needs.

3. The political tussle between the interests of states, districts and their employees vs. the interests of students and their families. Basic structural changes, power shifts and alternative approaches to governance are called for to deal with these new issues.

Creating a New American Urban School District would be an extremely complex and politically difficult undertaking, affecting fundamental elements of state constitutions and policies, and no doubt involving judicial review and support. Many questions would have to be answered, such as:

- What would be the role and responsibilities of this new district?
- What would be the standards students would have to meet and how would the district and schools be held accountable for seeing that students meet these standards?
- What policies would guide it to provide flexibility that accommodates school-based management; traditional schools; charter schools; members of the Coalition of Essential Schools, Comer schools, Accelerated Schools, Roots and Wings or other reform networks; privatization of services; and other local demands and needs?
- In turn, how would state departments of education and district central offices be restructured to respond to such new districts?
- What are the implications for teacher licensure and union contracts with districts?

"It is not too soon to begin imagining a New American Urban School District that can inspire hope in all its young people..."

- What are the implications for higher education's role in the preparation of teachers and administrators?
- What kinds of communications and politics would be necessary to deal with an issue that would affect so many different communities and their school systems?
- How can technology optimize this transformation?
- How would such a new district be staffed and funded?

Piecemeal change in urban systems has not worked. It is time to change what we mean by district or "system" and what we do to enable all children to learn what they must learn, when and where they can best learn it.

It is not too soon to begin imagining a New American Urban School District that can inspire hope in all its young people and pride in its community. And it is not too soon to create new state-district relationships that include more flexibility in return for more accountability. These steps, and the others described above, will result in a new urban education system that can inspire pride in the community and ensure future success for all its young people.

This publication was partially supported by the Prudential Foundation and the Joyce Foundation.

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January 1995